Performance Plan Checklist

Category	Items	Yes/No
Technical Requirements	Does the plan have a mission-results element that is aligned with Department and Agency or Staff Office goals?	
	Are there at least three critical elements?	
	Are there no more than seven total elements?	
	Does the performance plan cover the preponderance of the employee's responsibilities?	
	Does each element include standards with credible measures?	
	Does the non-supervisory plan incorporate EEO and Civil Rights responsibilities in at least one element?	
	Does the non-supervisory plan incorporate customer perspectives in at least one element?	
	Does the supervisory plan include a critical element for supervisory/managerial responsibilities? Does that element include standards for these responsibilities: • general supervisory • performance management • retention and succession planning • hiring and recruitment (if applicable)	
	Does the supervisory plan include a separate critical element for equal opportunity/civil rights and diversity?	
	Does the supervisory plan include accountability for cultural transformation responsibilities, either in the supervisory or mission results element?	
	Does the supervisory plan include appropriate measures or indicators of employee and/or customer/stakeholder feedback?	
	Was the employee invited to participate in developing the performance plan? By being involved, employees will have a better understanding of what is expected of them, will understand the terminology used, will understand how their performance will be measured, and will be more likely to accept and trust the whole process.	
Content Assessment	**Are the measures in the standards the correct ones?** Is the most appropriate and accurate way to measure the expectation(s) via quantity, quality, timeliness, cost savings or manner of performance? Are data for the measures attainable? Are the measures credible (i.e., observable, measurable, and/or demonstrable)?	

Are the critical elements truly critical? Would failure on the critical element mean that the employee's overall performance is unacceptable? For instance, assigning generic critical elements to all employees, regardless of the type of work they do, can be risky if the generic element does not truly represent their work. As an example, if a research organization required that every employee's performance plan include a critical element about teamwork, and its world-renowned research scientist, who independently made a scientific breakthrough, fails the teamwork element, would the organization be willing to rate the scientist as Unacceptable? Although teamwork may be important to the organization, it may not be important in this particular job. Supervisors should assign critical elements carefully.	
Is the meaning of acceptable performance clear? Are the expectations established in the elements and standards quantifiable, observable, and/or verifiable? Expectations that are specific and that clearly define what must be done, as well as how well it must be done, are more effective for managing and directing performance than vague or general expectations. In addition, MSPB and the courts have ruled that employees must know what they have to do and how well they have to do it to perform at an acceptable level. Both sound management principles and court rulings support this key criterion. For this reason, backwards standards are prohibited in USDA.	
Are the standards attainable? Are expectations reasonable? MSPB and the courts have ruled that, in most instances, performance standards at the Fully Successful level must not require absolute perfection. In addition, from a sound management perspective, research has shown that setting expectations that are impossible or nearly impossible to achieve can actually cause performance levels to drop because employees tend to give up if they perceive the goal as impossible.	
Are the standards challenging? Does the work unit or employee need to exert a reasonable amount of effort to reach the Fully Successful performance level? Or do they merely need to show up to work in order to be considered Fully Successful? Research has shown that setting expectations that are too easy (or too hard) leads to low performance. Because research also shows that specific, challenging expectations result in higher performance, the best Fully Successful standards will find a balance between being too hard or too easy.	
Are the standards fair? Are they comparable to expectations for other employees in similar positions? Applying different standards to employees doing the same work does not appear on its face to be fair or valid. Requiring the Reviewing Official to compare standards for similar work across an organization is one way of ensuring equity. In addition, do the standards allow for some margin of error? Requiring perfection is not fair, or acceptable, except for very rare instances.	

	Are the standards applicable? Can the Rating Official use the standards to appraise performance? The standards should clearly describe the factors that the supervisor would look for and how well those factors should be done (i.e., the quality, quantity, timeliness and cost-effectiveness requirements). In addition, can the supervisor effectively use the data collected through the measurement process? If monitoring performance on the element is too costly or time-consuming, the standard might need to be altered to include measures that are more manageable.	
	Will employees understand what is required? Elements and their standards should be written clearly and be specific to the job. If the standards are generic, they need to be supplemented with specific information so that employees know what they have to do to demonstrate performance at the Fully Successful level.	
	Are the elements and standards flexible? Can they be adapted readily to changes in resources or objectives? Elements and standards can be modified during the appraisal period to meet changing organizational goals and other situations, as long as the employee works under the new standards for at least the 90 days before a rating of record is assigned. This flexibility allows performance plans to be used as management tools to manage employee performance on a day-to-day and week-to-week basis, rather than as a bothersome, meaningless paperwork exercise that is done once a year and never referred to again.	
	Is the Fully Successful standard surpassable? Is it possible for an employee's performance to exceed it? If a performance plan includes Fully Successful standards that cannot be surpassed, it effectively eliminates the possibility of exceeding that level.	